

# Surrogate Selves

David Levinthal  
Cindy Sherman  
Laurie Simmons

gallery  
one



**Surrogate Selves: David Levinthal, Cindy Sherman,  
Laurie Simmons**

January 24–April 16, 1989

This exhibition is part of the Corcoran's Sesquicentennial of Photography series, which is supported by a grant from the Professional Photography Division, Eastman Kodak Company.

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The Corcoran Gallery of Art  
17th Street and New York Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20006

### Related Events

#### **Curator's Talk**

Terrie Sultan

Thursday, February 23, 6:30 p.m.

As part of the Gallery's Art & Co. evening art tour series, Curator of Contemporary Art Terrie Sultan will discuss **Surrogate Selves**. Space is limited; call 638-3211, extension 322, for ticketing information.

#### **Auto-Video**

Thursday, March 9, 6:30 p.m.

Frances and Armand Hammer Auditorium

Autobiographical themes shape the work of many video artists. In this special evening of video presentations featuring, among others, Mike Smith and Gerald L'Ecuyer, artists will screen selected pieces of their work and engage the audience in discussion.

# gallery one

We have come to understand our lives through pictures. Living in the latter part of the twentieth century, our comprehension of the world around us is no longer based solely on philosophical concepts. Increasingly, our experiences are synthesized by the orchestrating frame of the camera. David Levinthal, Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons have usurped the trust that we invest in photography and adapted it towards their own ends. Each has rejected the classic *verité* traditions and formal conventions of photography in favor of conceptual or perceptual narratives that play on our willingness to accept the authority of the images that we see presented daily through a variety of electronic and print media. Re-presented by the camera, their stagey sets or invented personae gain a semblance of credibility by appropriating the appearances of reality.

These artists adopt the techniques and devices of television and the movies to construct situations that explore the invasive nature of information and the highly personal nature of trust and belief that such massive doses of information demand. Cinematic conventions, mythic fictions, and the representation of stereotypes and archetypes establish the authority of an alternate history that these artists create and document in their photographic *mis-en-scene*. Viewing their work, it is no longer enough to say, "I do not know what 'reality' really is. But somehow I do know an illusion when I see one."<sup>1</sup>

David Levinthal constructs painstakingly scaled miniature dioramas in which he stages tiny, handpainted models. His photographic manipulations translate these tiny settings into proportions that approximate human scale. Levinthal's depictions create strongly heroic alter egos who exist in settings and positions that are both reminiscent of what we generally perceive to be accurate and strangely neutral and anonymous. He engages powerful shared memories that are based on our familiarity with television and cinema, creating a paradox between the authority that is invested in what is perceived to be true but what is in fact false. Discussing his work he paraphrases a line from John Ford's film, *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, "when the myth becomes the reality, you print the myth."<sup>22</sup>

Levinthal's images invert our assumptions of reality by playing on a vocabulary of notions about the west that have been expounded upon in the movies and television. This "wild west" is more dynamic and arresting than either the present existence or the more mundane facts of recorded history. Using a highly specific depth of field, lack of referent perspective and absence of set dressing, Levinthal purposefully withholds any implication of a specific sense of place from his photographs. Intellectually, we retain the knowledge that we are looking at photographs of toys, but Levinthal seduces us into accepting his obvious distortions as evidence of a plausible reality. Earlier narrative series, such as *Hitler Moves East* and *Modern Romance*, illustrate Levinthal's conviction that cinematic conventions are a more appealing subject than reality. These photographs of models and toys provide the pretext of an event: they fabricate a thematically linked series of illusions which can stand in for real experience. It is never difficult to discern the literal subject matter of Levinthal's photographs. In fact, Levinthal does not want his audience to have any preconceived notion about his photographs other than the lexicon of filmic images that the viewer brings to them.



David Levinthal, *Untitled*, 1985, (from the "Modern Romance" series), 3 x 3 feet, acrylic on canvas.



David Levinthal, *Untitled*, 1988, 47 1/2 × 49 inches, acrylic on vinyl.

Levinthal reaches back to his childhood for a remembered popular history that vividly recalls the sense of theatricality, color and setting of the cinematic icons of John Ford's scenes of Monument Valley in *Red River*, as well as the staged falseness of movie lots of the 1950s television westerns such as *Wagon Train* and *Gunsmoke*. The image in *Untitled*, 1988 (kneeling cowboy with horse), is a classic re-presentation of the ubiquitous relationship between a man and his horse which investigates a cumulative layering of popular images that have been forgotten, replaced or simply stored away. While the horseman's situation is paraphrased in terms of the "rugged west," his image nevertheless communicates a dynamic of our own personal experience. Levinthal says, "I find that to me there's something very intriguing about the ability to use toys for fabricated selves, to simulate a reality that is real in the sense that people respond to it emotionally the same way, if not, in fact, more so, because it's more dramatic."

Laurie Simmons is purposefully direct in the manner in which she frames her subject matter. She appropriates toys, dolls and stage-like sets to transform stereotypical situations into dramatic settings. Beginning by making photographs of doll-house interiors, Simmons subsequently interjected dolls and toys into her compositions that embodied notions about women and the home. Photographed and then enlarged, these images evoke a generalized type of moment which may trigger a specific memory of a perceived situation or a personal experience. Her images are simultaneously naive in their wholesale adoption of generalities, and sophisticated in their use of photographic vocabulary to evoke particular personal memories.

Throughout her career, Simmons has made bodies of work that are linked serially but do not comprise a linear narrative. In the Interiors series, stereotypical "mother" dolls appear not only in a variety of household activities (*New Kitchen/New View*, 1978), they also engage in surreal, dance-like interactions with giant lipsticks (*Pushing Lipstick*, 1979). Simmons also shifts scale, alternating between using surrogates and humans as her central subjects.<sup>3</sup> The work which comprises her Ventriloquism series illustrates her fascination with our willingness to equate an actual and a staged event. When Simmons began to photograph ventriloquism dummies she initially included the manipulator in her composition, reflecting the actual use of the doll as an interlocutor while subconsciously mirroring a posture she came to recognize was embodied in the numerous madonna and child votive figures she encountered while travelling in Italy. *Doug and Eddy/Black and White Room*, 1986, is one of the first images in this series. Rear-projections establish the operator and his dummy in front of grainy, hauntingly surreal landscapes or interiors. Simmons reinforces her disinterest in anecdotal storytelling with such cinematic motifs, offering only a suggestion of an interaction through juxtapositions of unrelated figure and ground that are both sensuous and patently false.



Laurie Simmons, *Pushing Lipstick*, 1979, color print.



Laurie Simmons, *Talking Ukulele*, 1987, 63 1/4 x 45 1/4 inches, cibachrome.

Simmons's preoccupation with ventriloquism dummies seems to be based on her fascination with both the generalities and specifics of relationships of power. The mannequin, while seemingly proclaiming an independent personality, cannot, in any real sense, exist without the aid of a higher control. It is ultimately reduced to the role of interlocutor. "The dummy in and of itself exists in a grey zone between a doll figure and a real person. Dummies are alter egos, someone who could say the things we could never say."<sup>4</sup> Photographing puppets with the sophisticated directness that one expects of an advertising layout, Simmons introduces shifting incongruities of scale that upset our equilibrium. Her disturbing images invite intimacy, but also hint at the forbidden territory of stage magicians and sideshow freaks. *Talking Ukulele*, 1987, illustrates a welcoming object, (in this case a familiar musical toy) which has a commonly understood use that has been subverted by the counterfeit human facial features applied to its form. Simmons amplifies on this pseudo-anthropomorphism in works such as *Walking Camera*, 1987, picturing the kind of grossly oversize objects that are given life through the magic world of theatrical musical comedy and television productions. These hybrids speculate on human connotations, further blurring the relationship between human beings and inert objects.

Voyeurism, the underlying attraction of the cinema, is a key component of Cindy Sherman's work. Sherman has systematically assumed a multitude of personae to convey specific roles or emotional states. Her photographs are staged events that invite our directed gaze as well as the willing suspension of our disbelief. Rather than depicting facets of a single personality, each of Sherman's pictures simultaneously intimates the details of a type of experience while casting doubt on the facts they ostensibly document. In her early work, Sherman photographed herself in a number of poses that mimicked familiar situations in contemporary life as they were depicted in the popular cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. Self-consciously simulating the lighting, decor and poses of movie stills, her scenes are often hauntingly familiar but are rarely specific, and often totally anonymous in their sense of place. In *Untitled Film Still #7*, 1978, Sherman assumes the role of a young woman who holds a martini in one hand as she emerges from a dark and disheveled motel room into the bright light of the day. Sherman expects us to understand and accept the conventions of her images. As viewers, we are not provided with a solution to this drama, but are invited to supply our own scenario. We gain a point of entry into her work by adapting our own experiences to suit her specifications. However, while the film-frame device has become a recognizable signpost of a fictional, motion picture world, Sherman gives us no hint about what to feel about what we see in her set pieces. She progressively assumes and then discards the properties of cinematic representation, leaving her viewers to draw their own conclusions based on the situational context of her poses.



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film still #7*, 1978, black and white photograph.



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #168*, 1987, 85 x 60 inches, color print.

Sherman bases her identity on a wholly fictional persona, suggesting the possibility of a narrative without delivering a plot. More recently she has become increasingly involved in the physical processes of make-up and other methods of changing her appearance. Sherman has become engrossed in the notion of disguise, and her work has become much more provocative and abstract. "I've come to the point where I understand how people can manipulate themselves to look a certain way. I'm disgusted with how people get themselves to look beautiful; I'm much more fascinated with the other side."<sup>5</sup>

Although she continues to use herself as a model, her presence is often either completely disguised—in *Untitled #152*, 1985, the bald, bloated manly figure behind a stand of wheat is an ominous fairytale creature who is no longer recognizable as the artist—or subverted entirely by the implied scenario, as in *Untitled #153*, 1985, where Sherman's grit-specked, waxen visage suggests both a broken doll and a dead human being. Sometimes they can be openly campy adaptations of Hollywood's preoccupation with the bizarre: *Untitled #167*, 1986, can be seen as a parody of contemporary murder mysteries, where stray body parts and witnesses glimpsed in unlikely places build suspense.

Her most recent photographs are progressively reductive in their willingness to disclose detailed information. Ultimately, they offer nothing more than the tracings of a possible event or imply the leftovers of some unspeakable activity. Sherman's storybook definitions take on social and political implications in *Untitled #168*, 1987, because there is no physical presence at all—only emptiness: blank monitor screen, empty suit, abandoned interior. The grey business suit, the necklace, the make-up container and the computer machinery are all icons of a successful professional woman. The ghostly vestiges of the absent personality that in the past would have been the artist herself may be Sherman's ultimate comment on the cult of personality. More importantly, they may also be seen as, perhaps, the remnants of a neutron-triggered holocaust, or a more immediate, personal, tragic "meltdown." These paraphernalia are invested by the artist with the emotional power of a *momento mori*. We are left to ponder fragments from which we must struggle to coax a plausible narrative or a personal experience. Seen this way, Sherman's black scenario is grimly humorous. When all is said and done, she seems to be saying, this is all there is: the accoutrements.

Terrie Sultan  
Curator of Contemporary Art

#### Footnotes

1. Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America 1961*, (NY: Atheneum, Macmillan Publishing Company), p ix.
2. In an interview with David Levinthal on October 4, 1988, he talked extensively about John Ford's films. The actual quote, "This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend," is spoken by a newspaper editor near the beginning of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, 1962.
3. Following several series using dolls and toys, Simmons introduced Water Ballet in 1980/81 in which she photographed live models underwater. This series was followed in 1981 with Dolls Underwater. Live models appear again in the Fake Fashion series in 1984/85.
4. Interview with Laurie Simmons, October 4, 1988.
5. Larry Frascella, "Cindy Sherman's Tales of Terror," *Aperture*, Summer 1986, p 49.

## Biographies

### David Levinthal

David Levinthal was born in San Francisco, California. He received degrees from Stanford University (AB), the Yale School of Art (MFA) and the Sloan School of Management at M.I.T. (SM) He currently lives and works in New York City.

#### Selected one-person exhibitions:

1977 Carpenter Center, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts  
1978 George Eastman House, Rochester, New York  
1985 Area X Gallery, New York, New York  
University of San Diego, California  
1986 University of Alabama, Birmingham, Alabama  
1987 303 Gallery, New York, New York  
Philadelphia College of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
1988 CEPA Gallery, Buffalo, New York, New York  
Laurence Miller Gallery, New York, New York

#### Selected group exhibitions:

1975 Las Vegas Art Museum, Las Vegas, Nevada  
1983 "In Plato's Cave," Marlborough Gallery, New York, New York  
1985 BC Space Gallery, Laguna Beach, California  
1986 303 Gallery, New York, New York  
"Acceptable Entertainment," Bruno Facchetti Gallery, New York, New York  
1987 "Avant-Garde in the Eighties," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California  
"Fabricated Photographs," International Center of Photography, New York, New York  
"Photography and Art 1946-86," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California  
"Exposed and Enveloped," Laurence Miller Gallery, New York, New York  
1988 "Return of the Hero," Burden Gallery, New York, New York  
"The Constructed Image II," Jones Troyer Gallery, Washington, District of Columbia  
"Rethinking American Myths," Laurence Miller Gallery, New York, New York

## **Cindy Sherman**

Cindy Sherman was born in New Jersey. She received her degree from the State University College at Buffalo (BA), and currently lives and works in New York City.

### **Selected one-person exhibitions:**

1979 Hallwalls, Buffalo, New York  
1980 Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Texas  
1981 Metro Pictures, New York, New York  
1982 The Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands  
1983 The St. Louis Art Museum, St. Louis, Missouri  
Musée d'Art et d'Industrie de Saint Etienne,  
Saint Etienne, France  
1984 Akron Art Museum, Akron, Ohio  
Galerie Monika Spruth, Cologne, West Germany  
1986 "Jenny Holzer/Cindy Sherman," The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Ohio  
Portland Art Museum, Portland, Oregon  
1987 "Cindy Sherman," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York  
Provinciaal Museum, Hasselt, Belgium  
1988 La Galería Máquina Español, Madrid, Spain  
Lia Rumma, Naples, Italy

### **Selected group exhibitions:**

1980 "Ils se Disent Peintres, Ils se Disent Photographes," ARC/Musée d'Art Moderne, Paris, France  
"Opening Group Exhibition," Metro Pictures, New York, New York  
1981 "Young Americans," Allen Memorial Art Museum, Oberlin, Ohio  
"Autoprotraits," Centre George Pompidou, Beaubourg, Paris, France  
1982 "La Biennale di Venezia," Venice, Italy  
"Documenta 7," Kassel, West Germany  
"Recent Color," San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, California  
1983 "1983 Biennial," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York  
"The New Art," Tate Gallery, London, England  
1984 "Color Photographs: Recent Acquisitions," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York  
"Content: A Contemporary Focus, 1974-1984," Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, District of Columbia  
1985 "1985 Biennial," Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, New York  
"Self-Portrait," The Museum of Modern Art, New York, New York  
1986 "Altered Egos: Samaras, Sherman, Wegman," Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix, Arizona  
"The American Exhibition," The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois  
1987 "The Pop Project," The Clocktower, New York, New York  
"Avant-Garde in the Eighties," Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California

## **Laurie Simmons**

Laurie Simmons was born on Long Island, New York. She received her degree at Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia (BFA) and currently lives and works in New York City.

### **Selected one-person exhibitions:**

1979 Artist Space, New York, New York  
P.S. 1, Long Island City, New York  
University of Rhode Island, Kingston,  
Rhode Island

1981 Diane Brown Gallery, Washington,  
District of Columbia  
Metro Pictures, New York, New York

1983 Metro Pictures, New York, New York  
CEPA Gallery, Buffalo, New York

1984 Galerie Tanja Grunert, Stuttgart, West Germany  
International with Monument, New York,  
New York

1985 Weatherspoon Art Gallery, University of  
North Carolina, Greensboro,  
North Carolina  
"Actual Photos" (collaboration with  
Allan McCollum), Nature Morte, New York,  
New York  
Tyler School of Art, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
Josh Baer Gallery, New York, New York

1988 Metro Pictures, New York, New York

### **Selected group exhibitions:**

1980 "Invented Images," UCSB Art Museum,  
University of California, Santa Barbara,  
California

1981 "Erweiterte Fotografie," 5. Wiener  
Internationale Biennale, Wiener Secession,  
Vienna, Austria  
"Figures: Forms and Expressions," Albright-  
Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York

1982 "The Image Scavengers," Institute of  
Contemporary Art, Philadelphia,  
Pennsylvania

1983 "Images Fabriquees," Centre George  
Pompidou, Beaubourg, Paris, France  
"Subjective Vision," The High Museum of Art,  
Atlanta, Georgia

1984 "A Decade of New Art," Artists Space, New  
York, New York  
"Between Here and Nowhere," Riverside  
Studios, London, England

1985 "1985 Biennial," Whitney Museum of  
American Art, New York, New York  
"Swimmers," Pace/McGill, New York, New  
York

1986 "La Magie de l'Image," Musée d'Art  
Contemporain de Montreal, Montreal,  
Canada  
"Remembrances of Things Past," Long Beach  
Museum of Art, Long Beach, California

1987 "Photograph and Art: Interactions Since  
1946," Los Angeles County Museum of  
Art, Los Angeles, California  
"Arrangements for the Camera: A View of  
Contemporary Photography," The Baltimore  
Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland

1988 "Media Post Media," Scott Hanson Gallery,  
New York, New York

## Surrogate Selves Checklist

### David Levinthal

*Untitled*, 1987

Polaroid SX-70 Time-Zero Supercolor Film

3 x 3 inches

Courtesy Laurence Miller Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1987

Polaroid SX-70 Time-Zero Supercolor Film

3 x 3 inches

Courtesy Laurence Miller Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1987

Polaroid SX-70 Time-Zero Supercolor Film

3 x 3 inches

Courtesy Laurence Miller Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1988

Acrylic on vinyl

47 1/2 x 49 inches

Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1988

Acrylic on vinyl

47 3/4 x 48 3/8 inches

Courtesy 303 Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1988

Polaroid Polacolor ER 20 x 24 Land Film

32 x 22 inches

Courtesy Laurence Miller Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1988

Polaroid Polacolor ER 20 x 24 Land Film

32 x 22 inches

Courtesy Laurence Miller Gallery, New York

*Untitled*, 1988

Polaroid Polacolor ER 20 x 24 Land Film

32 x 22 inches

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Polaroid Polacolor ER 20 x 24 Land Film

32 x 22 inches

Courtesy Laurence Miller Gallery, New York

### Cindy Sherman

*Untitled* #152, 1985

Color print

72 1/2 x 49 3/8 inches

Collection of Phoebe Chasm

*Untitled* #153, 1985

Color print

65 1/2 x 47 1/2 inches

Collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago

*Untitled* #167, 1986

Color print

61 1/8 x 91 1/8 inches

Collection of Susan and Lewis Manilow

*Untitled* #168, 1987

Color print

85 x 60 inches

Collection of Gail and George Baril

*Untitled* #175, 1987

Color print

49 1/4 x 73 1/4 inches (framed)

Collection of Suzanne Feldman

*Untitled* #178, 1987

Color print

71 x 47 3/4 inches

Collection of Dr. and Mrs. Aaron Nisenson

**Laurie Simmons**

*Doug and Eddy/Black and White Room*, 1986

Color print

24 1/2 x 24 inches

Collection of the artist

Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York

Edition of three prints from the *Ventriloquism* series, 1986

Photolithograph and photogravure

33 1/2 x 26 5/8 inches

Courtesy Editions Ilene Kurtz, New York

*Talking Purse*, 1987

Cibachrome

63 1/2 x 52 inches

Collection of Elaine Berger

*English Lady*, 1987

Cibachrome

35 x 24 inches

Collection of Eileen and Michael Cohen

*Walking Camera (Jimmy the Camera)*, 1987

black and white photograph

83 1/4 x 47 1/4 inches

Collection of Rita Krauss

*Talking Ukulele*, 1987

Cibachrome

63 1/4 x 45 1/4 inches

Collection of the artist

Courtesy Metro Pictures, New York

*Two Faced Figure*, 1987

Cibachrome

35 x 24 1/4 inches

Collection of Batsheva and Ronald Ostrow

*The Frenchman (Mickey)*, 1987

Cibachrome

35 x 25 1/4 inches

Collection of Estelle Schwartz

